

HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

Michigan high school football coaches must lead players, stop whining about wearing masks

Mick McCabe Special to Detroit Free Press

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Six seconds.

How much distress can you endure for 6 seconds?

What level of discomfort can you put up with for 6 seconds?

How badly do you want to play football?

High school football begins this week, just a month after we all thought we wouldn't be playing football until next March.

Coaches and players are gung-ho to get the season started. Which is why I'm disappointed with how much griping I'm still hearing throughout the state.

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Two weeks ago, Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer changed her mind and high school football was back on and all was right with the world.

But then last week, the governor issued an executive order stating that high school athletes, except in a few outdoor sports, must wear protective facial coverings during practices and games.

And now, according to some football coaches, "Armageddon" is upon us and Bruce Willis and Ben Affleck are not here to save us from extermination.

Some of these whining coaches make it sound as if we are asking their players to compete with one arm tied behind their backs while wearing blindfolds.

[Here are our Top 50 players entering the 2020 football season]

The reality is this is not a negotiation. You either wear a facial covering or you don't play. Maybe at all this season.

To be honest, I am much more concerned over the safety of volleyball players and soccer players wearing a face covering than I am football players.

Why? Six seconds.

That is how long the average play lasts in high school football.

If a running back breaks free for a long touchdown, the play may take longer than 6 seconds. But in that instance, for almost all the other players on the field, that play was over in about 3 seconds.

[Here are our Top 25 teams entering the 2020 season]

This is where coaches need to take command.

Coaches set the tone for a team in almost every way imaginable.

If a coach forcefully says this is what we are doing, then the players do it without questions. If a coach whines about having to do something, then you can bet how the players are going to react to it.

And judging by some of the early practice results, some coaches are giving a wink and a nod to the players who are wearing their masks or coverings down around their necks, if at all.

[Why Utica High School football had no choice but to delay season opener]

I firmly believe that football is the best team game in sports. It teaches youngsters lessons that last a lifetime.

Football is a way for youngsters to be a part of something bigger than themselves, as they learn about sacrificing for the greater good.

Yeah, it stinks that we are one of only two states in the country in which football players have to wear facial coverings during games, but it is now the law.

Which means we have no choice.

Some schools have purchased shields that fit on the helmet and therefore don't have to wear masks.

There also are gaiters and disposable masks they can wear that make it impossible to wear mouthguards that are attached to the face mask. To hear the reaction, I'm surprised coaches are able to field a team.

Here is a suggestion: Don't attach the mouthguard to the face mask. Problem solved.

Game officials are not responsible for enforcing the mask rule. The Michigan High School Athletic Association is leaving that up to the athletic director of the home team, and the ADs need to act like administrators.

If athletes aren't wearing masks properly, the AD needs to immediately stop the game. And if it continues, the game needs to be forfeited.

Because of the physicality of football — you've got at least 10 players banging into each other every time the ball is snapped — teams need to be vigilant in complying with the executive order.

Soccer is another sport in which bodies are colliding, and it is disturbing to see pictures from games in which few players are wearing masks, including at last week's Livonia Stevenson-Wayne game, which featured a bench-clearing altercation..

This is where the coach must step in and tell players to mask up or sit down.

There is no guarantee this football season lasts more than a few weeks. If the state has a spike in COVID-19 cases and it traces back to football players, the governor will shut this down faster than you can say, "We should have worn our masks."

Wearing a mask is a major pain only when the coaches treat it as such.

This is just another challenge in a challenging season, and one of the ideologies of football is you do what you have to do. Period.

Last weekend, we picked up our 3-year-old grandson, Kellan, from daycare and out he came wearing his mask.

I asked the teacher how the 3-year-olds were dealing with wearing masks, and she said it hasn't been an issue.

That is because their parents told them they had no choice but to wear a mask.

So now the coaches need to step up and become the leaders their teams need them to be in situations such as this.

After all, it's for only 6 seconds at a time.

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